

APRIL 12, 1984

Most Shortgrass ranches started into the winter without enough grass to make Christmas, much less enough to last until spring. Scattered around were a few outfits that had fall rains, but in main part, the rest of us were using a paper and pencil to set our stocking rate and allowing our optimism to ruin our judgment.

So at this date in the first week of April, we've got herds of thin, nursing cows that should have been sold to the packers last October. Sacked goods are helping a little, but without a rain in April this land is going to go through a de-stocking that will make the Hannibal's crossing of the Alps look like he tied his elephants' trunks to their forelegs.

Last week I stopped and watched a herd of white cows that had wintered fat on good range. Their slick hides and shiny hair looked out of place after seeing so many drouth victims. The afternoon was warm and still, so I parked and sat on the tailgate of my pickup while the cows shifted their weight on the bed grounds and drowsed in the late winter sun. The calves, I guessed, were a hundred pounds heavier than mine; their mothers looked to be fleshier than the dry end of our cattle.

I thought back to all those good years we had in the '70's. I know I wrote about the fall we contracted our steer calves for a dollar a pound. Never in the history of the Shortgrass Country was there such a beautiful fall: mornings cooled by an autumn overhang, days cushioned by a green turf of luxuriant grasses and tinted by late wild flowers.

Probably the grandmothers of those fat white cows were first calf heifers that wonderful year. Once herders were so crazy for that breed that French blood was smuggled through Mexico. I'd dread today to have to force a smuggler to confess that he'd passed anything of the value of cattle across a boundary. At best, he'd get a habitual criminal charge. As expensive as it is to trail or ship cattle by truck, crossing a county line is hard to justify. It'd be a difficult case to defend. I sure wouldn't want anyone that indifferent to economics for a partner.

On top of having a good home, these white cows also had plenty of prickly pear to eat. One old gal weighing in at about a wasty 1200 was obsessed with swallowing a horny leaf. Out of shame. I think, she'd close her eyes and display a total indifference to her own health. I can excuse a cow doing her best to live for getting on anything to fill her stomach, but that self-abuser had about as much excuse for eating pear as I would of matching a race with the sports cars that kept roaring by my lookout spot.

And to further think that my paternal grandfather once put out tobacco free choice for his sheep and cat. tie. Had this user been around, she'd have been a hopeless tobacco addict.

I don't actually believe that a cow can be cured from a bad habit. Strict confinement is the only remedy I know for a cow dead set on self destruction. Vaguely I remember, as a kid, running cattle off dry bones, but I'd as soon forget those times.

What a half-inch would do for us now. The string is pulled about as far as it'll go without losing the spool. Clouds are building up in the west. Tonight may be the end of winter.